

A Tale That Runs Swiftly.  
Like a Brook.

# BLACK MOON

BY THOMAS BEER

How Closely Are Humor  
and Grim Tragedy Related

THE hat appeared over the crest of rock among the cedars. Helios studied it. It was Grandfather Bunt's hat, and the old man might be underneath it. Again, he might have put it on a flat slab of rock while he read his St. Paul paper. Helios steadied the air rifle against his brown shoulder and fired. The hat spun gallantly off toward Lake Michigan, and there was a hideous yell. The face of Milton Bunt rose redly beyond the rocks in a nimbus of gray beard. He yelled: "That's right! Go ahead! Your fool of a mother says you're too big to lick. Go ahead!" Helios said: "He that calleth his daughter a fool is—"

"That's right," his grandfather shrieked. "Go and get blasphemous, too! What with them French whoop-ies in their heads off on the front grass, and you tryin' to kill me out here, it's a wonder I don't go off to the farm and leave you flat."

"It's a wonder you don't, sir," said Helios in a gentlemanly agreement. His three small half-sisters, Agnes, Jeanne and Marie Harel, came about the corner of the house and whooped dismally, together. Helios sighed. He got up, with dignity, shouldered the air rifle and strolled down the baking turf to the beach of white fine sand. Mr. Bunt retired up the lawn. Helios stretched his brown legs on the blistering sand and admired the world, thoughtless and comfortable, until his mother called. "Heel!" in a voice meant to be angry.

Mme. Olsen was coming down the grass in her Wednesday nightgown of rose silk. Her braids of yellow hair hung loosely over a beryl wrap, and as she came she lost one slipper. The bare foot, big and beautiful, flashed over the sand. She said: "Golly, but it's hot! Heel, I don't see how you stand it! Now, what d'you mean by shootin' up your grandfather?" She beamed, accusing him. Helios patted the sand beside him and his mother sat down. She ordered: "Run and get my slipper, lamb. Money it wasn't the right one. It's awful bad luck to drop off your right slipper. Thank you, honey."

"Don't mention it, Blondie," said Helios, putting the slipper back over her toes. He sat down again and complained: "I've done everything I can to make grandfather go home."

MME. OLSEN chuckled deeply. She said: "Now, Heel, the poor old man's awful fond of Sig and you. You oughtn't to shoot your father round some in summer. He says I ought to have Sig thrash you. Where is Sig?"

"Went over to the inn to get some horse-drops for the French," Helios yawned. "The joints all shot up, isn't it? Harel's got a bust arm, the kids have whoopin' cough, and we've got grandfather on our hands. It's awful. I'd better shoot a rabbit to change our luck."

His mother chuckled. "And I got a letter from the op'ra; they're thinkin' of revivin' 'Faust.' Ain't that the limit? There's something perfectly indecent about a woman with five children singing 'Marguerite.' I ain't sung it since your father sang 'Faust.' The stundt loveliness of her marine eyes changed, briefly to a shadow. Helios sat rigid. She seldom spoke of his father, Demetrios Aleri. Now she touched the necklace of sixteen emeralds about her neck, sighed and declared: "Well, I'm still thin enough to sing 'Marguerite,' and the most most sopranos with five kids could say."

She beamed at Lake Michigan and said: "What'll I sing over at the inn tomorrow night, Heel? You got to play my accompaniments 'count of Harel's arm.'"

Helios grunted. "You might as well sing 'The End of a Perfect Day' for that bunch of catfish."

"And don't get so high and mighty about the folks at the inn," said Mrs. Olsen. "I don't think Anderson's good for you, Bub. You were born right over there at Pointe Carosse. It wasn't a hotel then; there was just a boardin' house and some cottages."

The boy stammered: "Thought I happened in London, Blondie."

His mother picked up two pebbles and clicked them in a palm. She said: "Not much, sonny. Couldn't stand London after your father was murdered. I came to St. Paul. I sent Harel out to find some place—quiet. Came down here and called myself Mrs. Smith. Gracious, I was blue! Losin' two good husbands one after another—Oh, well, Sig's twenty, and you're near seventeen. You're an awful nuisance, Heel. Don't you shoot your grandfather again."

Mme. Olsen tossed the pebbles into the lake, kissed his bare shoulder and ran up the lawn in the flutter of green and pink silks. Her yellow hair shimmered in the morning light; she was like a pond lily floating swiftly. She sang, running a scale that showered strong and high notes into the breeze. Helios stood up to watch her and muttered a respectful "Gosh!"

A thick female voice said, on the water: "Was that Mme. Olsen that went away, then?"

She looked like an eggplant. Her hair was black. She wore a gown of purple silk that bled out of the red canoe, sunk deep in the lake. She was not old, but gross, inelegant, sweating. She must be an intrusive sighter from the Pointe Carosse Inn. Helios smiled and sat down, crossed-legged on the beach, placing the air-gun on his knees. He said: "No, that wasn't Mme. Olsen. That's her eldest daughter."

to death. Pablo Sarceda—trick xylophone player?"

"Heavens," said the woman, "e don't play nothin' any more. I wish 'e did! What with the cards and— but you tell 'er that, remember, now. You won't forget?" She thrust the paddle into the sand and panted. Helios took a step into the lake and shoved the canoe free. The woman coughed. "Thanky," and the shell floated wabbling away. Sigurd's



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green canoe passed the red craft, and Sigurd turned his flashing yellow head to examine the purple eggplant. He landed, still grinning.

"What was that?"

"She's a cockney," said Helios, "and she wanted me to tell Blondie that some goof or other—the dickens was his name? He's at the inn."

Sigurd took a paper bag of horse-drops from his coat of white flannel, waved it to the small Harels, who came whooping down the grass and received this solace with strangled thanks. The tall boy patted their heads amiably as if they were puppies. Helios wasn't much interested in them. They weren't old enough to make music, like their father, and they couldn't throw him about as Sigurd did. They trotted off solemnly. Sigurd sat down on the sand.

Helios believed that Sigurd's round head contained only three topics—their mother, pole-vaulting and anxiety over Helios' vanishing. This last strain now bubbled forth. Sigurd said a pipe and said: "See here, Heel, I don't think you ought to call her Blondie in front of people, in shops and things. Look at this. But don't show it to Blondie. Got something about your father in it."

Helios spread yesterday afternoon's Chicago paper on his legs and observed a long paragraph:

"Diva's Necklace in Trouble—Mme. Katherine Olsen came flying into Paulding's repair department early this morning with her famous string of emeralds in a sling, so to speak. Madame arrived from her summer home at Pointe Carosse. The necklace never leaves the soprano's person, and it took considerable finesse to repair the chain without damaging Madame, who was good natured and voluble as usual. Her three little girls are having the whooping cough, she told the world. Husband Jean Harel is laid up with a broken arm. Sons Sigurd Olsen and Helios Aleri came along with their mother, who looked like a girl, in a frock of silver and blue. Mr. Olsen took a lively interest in the repairs. Mr. Aleri remained mostly behind a sporting page. He addressed his mother as 'Blondie.' The necklace belonged to Demetrios Aleri, Mme. Olsen's second husband. The celebrated Greek tenor presented it to his bride on their wedding in London. He was mysteriously murdered a few months later, and his assassin was never found. Mme. Olsen denies that the emeralds are of any great value. Her attachment to the necklace appears to be purely sentimental."

HELIOS yawned: "Blondie's the biggest mush-head alive. Wish the papers'd drop father, though. Gives her the blues." He made a ball of the newspaper and pitched it at a seagull careening near the beach. He pondered his getting out of bed to see who'd come into the next room, and her going and finding him stabbed. He won the necklace playing cards with some singer or somebody, and gave it to her because it's good luck to have a piece of jewelry you've won at cards. . . . Oh, I remember why she told me not to tell you! Sigurd shut his mouth.

"Why?"

Helios waited. The big lad said: "Oh, well! She got an idea this fellow that Aleri won the necklace from was 'one that stabbed him. He'd try to buy it back, y' see? Fact! She told the police in London about it, and they arrested this fellow. Only, he had an alibi. He was at home asleep when the murder happened. Blondie didn't want you to know that. She thinks you're imaginative. And you are, rather," Sigurd decided, getting up. "I guess it's your Greek blood."

Helios picked up the air-rifle and

aimed it at one of his half-brother's white buckskin shoes. The pellet left a black mark on the leather. Sigurd howled and chased Helios up into the hall of the cool cottage, floored him and spanked him. Grandfather Bunt put his head out of the music room door and barked: "That's right, Sig! Yes, if you'd wear more clothes like a Christian, Heel, it wouldn't hurt so much!"

Sigurd let the sinner go and sat on



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the captured air-gun, nursing his shoe. He groaned: "That thing hurts you big idiot!"

"What you get for callin' me a Greek, you dirty Scandinavian!" said Helios as he marched up the polished stairs. He met Mme. Olsen in the upper hall and was pleased with her gown of knitted sapphire silk. So he kissed her and remarked:

"Younger every day, Blondie. Next thing you'll be out along with the opera. Club, in London. A spitter came down from the ceiling and lit on his shoulder. A sign of good luck, you know? And that night he met Madame at Lady Cadogan's musical. Oh, he was most superstitious! It is the curious co-incidences that make people superstitious. Madame and Aleri and I walked home from Park Lane after the last concert. It was a bright night. We talked of our sailing to New York for the opera. We came about the corner into Dover street, and Aleri dropped his cane. He picked it up. He said: 'Blast! I have seen my shadow!' Madame and I, we laughed. Well, four hours afterward he was dead—poor, good man!"

HE groaned and dropped his feet. "Better put up signs, Blondie! Bad luck to sit on a table! Well, if you wear that red thing with the gold on the stomach, I'll play all your songs in B flat and run the show."

"It's a lucky dress, lamb. Mercy, but you're gettin' critical! Like your father! Well, go speak to Harel, you ain't been in to see him today, and he's scared you'll bust loose on the pedals tomorrow night."

Harel had broken his right arm badly and was still kept in bed. Helios liked him and so sat on the foot of the bed, lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, but Madame told you not to, Helios! Well, go shut the door so the smoke will not blow downstairs. Now, Madame has decided to give the 'Chanson Indoue,' the Debussy romance, a Scriabine and a Carpenter. The 'Boat Song'—tomorrow night. That will make a good set and the accompaniments will be easy for you."

"This in concert is an awful graft," said Helios. "She does it every year. One of the clerks told Sig that a wad of stuff's come from Detroit and Chicago just to hear her without payin' for it."

"A wad of stuff, Helios. Mon Dieu, you collect slang as Madame collects superstitions!"

Helios inquired: "Look here—you've known Blondie longer'n I have, Jean. How did she get this way? Superstitious, I mean."

The pianist smiled a little. He answered:



THE man shrugged. "But if one picks up little things! A boy so handsome as you has, of course, somewhere a girl? And she likes pretty things. But sometimes one wants cash. For drinks and poker."

The boy thought this deft. He liked the hints of debauchery. He said: "Well, yeh. Hootch comes pretty high round here."

The man's bare head showed delicate streaks of gray in its darkness. His hands were white and the nails were lacquered to deep rose. He

shuffled a trim brown boot in the fern and gently put forth:

"And Madame has so much of everything. These painted, vulgar women who—"

Some spring within Helios brought him upright in a jerk. He cried: "Shut your head, Blondie doesn't paint! She—" His throat went stiff in rage. He lurched against the square mesh of wire in a blow that didn't land. The man stepped back without speaking and walked off. The boy's shoulder hurt, all the muscles wrenched. His eyes were filled with a mottled whirling. He was scared by his own wrath and panted, clinging to the fence. When his eyes cleared the sunny road was lit across it. Helios shot and missed. He went back into his mother's forest and came to a cleared glade where Sigurd was practicing pole-vaults busily. Told of the affront to their mother, Sigurd opened his eyes and shrugged.

Helios pitched a pebble nervously into the road and watched the dust ripple; a rabbit which scuttled along the roadway, then doubled back from a lone man. The man raised a brown sleeve and crossed himself twice. Then he stooped and marked something in the dust. Helios straightened and craned. His mother didn't cross herself, meeting rabbits, but she marked a circle in the dust if possible. Helios noted this walker—a burly, pallid man who marched along easily and nodded, halting before the gap in the wire.

"I see your fence needs mending?" he said.

"To mend the fence?"

"No. To keep people out," said Helios, lifting the gun a trifle.

The man laughed, nodding. "I see. Madame keeps a forest guard?"

Helios expanded the idea. "Sure. She's got ten of us. All along the fence."

"And how much a day does Madame pay you?"

"Fifty cents," said Helios cheerfully. "Ain't much, is it? But these rich skirts, they're awful stingy."

The man walked up to the wires and leaned on the mesh. He fanned his pleasing face with a smart, flat cap and said: "Oh, but I do not much pity you. In the houses of these rich women there are always ways to make money. One—picks up things."

Helios thrilled. Beyond doubt, this was a crook! He jorged the air-gun on his knee and arranged a grin. "Oh, well—yeh?"

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"You ought to write a book on tact, sir," Helios jeered.

Mme. Olsen said: "Hush up, Heel! Well, daddy, we'll pray it's a cloudy

night. Now, lamb, where are you off to. I'll want to practice at 4."

"I'm going to shoot bunnies so they won't run across your path and give you the jimmies," Helios explained.

Helios trotted into the unkempt forest which guarded his mother's cottage from the motor road. Island. He shot at three rabbits which flickered into view. He chased one that seemed to limp down to the barrier of wires by the road before this amusement left him bored. He sat down at a gap in the wires and observed the afternoon's scant traffic.

The tall fence ran for a quarter-mile along the lane. It had signs here and there. "Private Property." Mme. Olsen saw visitors only by engagement. Her retreat was real. She emerged annually for this concert at Pointe Carosse Inn. Helios sat in the fern and dreamed tomorrow night. He had never played accompaniments in public. It would be an ordeal.

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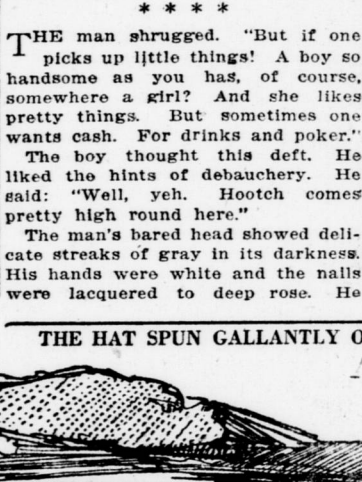
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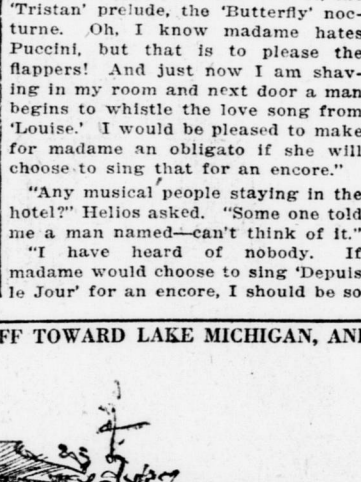
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very contented to make her an obligato?"

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AT 8 Sigurd considered Helios, sufficiently well dressed. At 8:30 Mr. Bunt climbed into the limousine beside Mme. Olsen and genially said: "Well, Katie, it's black as pitch. You couldn't see your shadow with a gas lamp!"

"That's some comfort. Sit here with me, Heel. Now, lamb, you're goin' to do all right."

"Of course, he is," said Sigurd; "but stop pulling your tie, Heel!"

"Now, don't look at the audience, lamb!" Mme. Olsen ordered. "I've got on this fireman's bride dress, and they won't look at nothin' else for a while."

The lamp in the roof of the limousine revealed the scarlet robe and its girdle of folded gold tissue. It warmed Helios. His mother let him smoke a cigarette, and the motor went about the inlet to the inn grounds lighted with Chinese globes. Soon Helios looked through a door at the platform where the orchestra was disgorging piled noises in the "Prince Igor" dance. Suddenly he was sitting at the piano, and the room rattled applause for his mother.

Helios saw his fingers darken the keys, and Madame Olsen sang. The emeralds rose and fell upon her breast. She beamed and bowed. The first song was over, and Helios gasped in his surprise. He kept on gasping as each song finished. Between times in the dressing room, Madame Olsen kissed his nose and told him he was doing swell. There was a final wave of applause, and the eager orchestra leader came out of the palms.

Helios scurried through the dressing room to the veranda. That, too, was jammed with people. Helios climbed a rail and peered over heads. Madame Olsen had begun the slow air of "Louise." She stood near the edge of the platform, the emeralds softly blinking like tired eyes on the white breast. She sang. The violin crooned behind her. A woman below Helios sniffed violently, and an odor of lilac arose. It came from the purple eggplant in a black dress smeared with jet.

The song came to an end. People stood up to clap. The hotel manager hurried down with a huge ball of roses. Cap-chairs clattered, and a man drawled, "Who'd of thought she was a farmer's girl out of Minnesota?" To which a woman answered: "I guess those are the emeralds was in the paper."

Mr. Bunt thought badly of the supper in the manager's suite after the reception. The limousine confined his grumblings until the party reached the house and went to bed. Helios yawned. "That's over! You weren't too loud once. And go to bed. You're tired to death. Mercy," he exclaimed on the stairs, "ain't it dark! You wouldn't know it was a full moon. Pitch black!"

With midnight, all the bulbs of Pointe Carosse were gone. Sigurd turned out the bedroom lamps and the universe became invisible.

"It's a joke on the moon," said Helios. He giggled: "Think of all the sticks that were goin' to give straw-rides and all the mush-heads like Blondie that are scared of full moons!"

"Go to bed," Sigurd said from his corner.

"I've gone," Helios yawned, on his cot by the window. "But I don't think I'll go to sleep. Tell me the story of your life, Sigurd."

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SIGURD'S pillow brushed Helios in passing. It flopped on the veranda roof. Helios tenderly said: "Hope you fall off the edge gettin' it back, Svenska!" and shut his eyes. His brother couldn't sleep without a pillow. In ten minutes there were rustlings. Five minutes later Sigurd groaned, and there was a delicate padding of soles on the floor. Helios opened an eye but saw nothing. His amusement was lost in the blackness. He shut the eyes again. Sigurd climbed back through the window, and very suddenly there were rustlings. Five minutes later Sigurd groaned, and there was a delicate padding of soles on the floor. Helios opened an eye but saw nothing. His amusement was lost in the blackness. He shut the eyes again. Sigurd climbed back through the window, and very suddenly there were rustlings. Five minutes later Sigurd groaned, and there was a delicate padding of soles on the floor. Helios opened an eye but saw nothing. His amusement was lost in the blackness. He shut the eyes again. 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